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## DRAMATIC INCIDENTS IN THE CONQUEST OF GAUL

THERE is hardly an epoch in the history of mankind so humdrum and commonplace that somewhere in its annals is not to be found the record of incidents that thrill and inspire us by their dramatic power. A study of life even in its commonest phases has an unquestionable value to one who would enrich the present with all the lessons of the past. Yet it is in the crises of history that we find the noblest lessons, the deepest inspiration, for it is only in these that we see man at his highest, gathering together for one mighty effort all the powers of body and soul. And so we instinctively turn away from the events of everyday life to the moments of greatest stress, seeking there to read the possibilities of man's unnumbered powers.

In the following pages we shall consider a few of the crises in the conquest of Gaul, hours when the history of what is now the present hung trembling in the balances. Who can measure the importance of those decisive moments in the history of Europe, who can imagine how long the advance of civilization might have been delayed had the barbarians of the North been successful in repulsing the influence of Roman civilization! What dramatic power these incidents of the Gallic war gain when we consider them thus in their true relation to the history of mankind.

The theme itself considered from the standpoint of its dramatic worth becomes a subject of fascinating interest, because so suggestive of some of the most thrilling tragedies of history. It is not here for the first nor the last time that we see a brave, patriotic, but untutored folk crushed and outraged by the superior forces of civilization. All through the symphony of human history this harsh theme has constantly reappeared, jarring discordantly with the milder notes of the music. The individual rights and sentiments of weaker peoples have been repeatedly sacrificed that the broader humanity might not be

hindered in its development. It is only an older version of the same tragedy that began when such dusky heroes as the brave Philip of Pokanoket sealed with their blood their protests against the encroachments of the pale-face invaders, and which will end only when the last red man is either driven from the earth or doffs his barbaric finery for the garments of civilization.

The first scene opens so quietly that we hardly realize that we have before us all the elements for a great national tragedy. From the Pyrenees to the Rhine, from the Alps to the sea, barbaric life seems to be moving on in its usual round of seed-time and harvest, while far in the background we catch a glimpse of a keen-eyed Roman statesman bidding his time to make his influence felt in the course of Gallic affairs. The only suggestion of the impending disaster is the note of plaintive discontent sounding forth from a comparatively unimportant tribe of mountaineers. High up among the Swiss Alps we see a race of stalwart warriors laying aside their rude weapons to watch in eager expectation over the fields of germinating grain, a new hope, a new purpose, burning at their hearts.

And as the grain grows yellow and the mountain valleys teem with the preparations of the people to escape the hated limitations of their wild homeland, we find our interest intensified, for we realize that this hardy folk is to open the action of the Gallic War. At last it comes. There is the hour of half regret; then the gleam of the torch, and we see a long, slow-moving column winding down the defiles of the mountains, the lurid glow of their burning homes lighting up the sky behind them.

Need I recall the rest? You remember the despair of those first few weeks on the rough shores of the Rhone, when the Roman general wrecked their hopes by refusing them passage through the Roman province, and then the feeling, half relief, half regret, with which they pulled their heavy-laden carts past the last barrier of their homeland, the narrow gateway between the Jura and the Rhine. Then after that weary march of a month across the Sequanian territory, there came that tragic morning by the Saône, when the Roman general swept down the

heights of Sathony and in the weird glow of the dawn cut the brave Tigurini to pieces, merciless even to the helpless women and children.

You will remember, too, the outcome of it all, how, after the Roman legions had followed the Helvetians for days up the valley to the west, there came that first battle of the war, so fatal to both contending forces. And here again we see the brave mountaineers, a pitiful remnant now, crushed and war-stained, wandering back heart-broken to their wasted fields and the fire-blackened ruins of their former homes. Two hundred and forty-eight thousand of their neighbors and kinsmen lay dead in a strange land and only they left to begin life anew amid the old surroundings.

How tragically does this first scene end! Even Cæsar himself, as he stood in the deserted camp of his conquered foe and read from their tablets the extent of his victory, must have been pained by the pity of it all.

The first alliance of Belgian states made against Cæsar during the winter following the events just narrated, although it glowed with the inflamed patriotism of the masses, lacked the unity of organization which comes only when there is some one mind to direct the force of the whole. You will remember that in the First Belgian Campaign we have the name of not a single Belgian leader. There are on the scene no figures that stand out against the background of the barbaric throng as more prominent than the common herd. It was preëminently a movement of the masses, the surging of brute force, guided alone by its own passions and instincts.

The Second Belgian Campaign was, however, more complicated in its scope. It came nearer being successful, for the reason that in it the fury of the multitude had the guidance of such men as Ambiorix and Indutiomarus. It failed of its end because these men were themselves moved by selfish, personal motives, and were not great enough to act in the interests of their nation alone.

All through the dark horror of the winter we feel the fury of

Indutiomarus' hatred, even when he himself is not a part of the action, just as in *Lohengrin* we feel the bitterness of Ortrud's hate, even when she is fawning upon the simple, unsuspecting Elsa. The importance of those introductory events in June preceding the opening of the action can only be appreciated when it is realized that Indutiomarus, whose enmity Cæsar had aroused by deposing him in favor of another, was the instigator of almost all the action of the following winter, first the overwhelming disaster of Labienus and Cotta, then as the outgrowth from this the siege of Cicero's camp and later the attack on Labienus.

In all this wonderful narrative, Cæsar has painted no picture with so much attention to detail as the Siege of Cicero's Camp, and there is, consequently, no picture more thrillingly vivid than this. In all the confusion of the attack, when the war-worn soldiers stand on the works facing a foe that seems practically numberless, while behind them the wind is fanning to a fury of flame the fiery darts hurled by the enemy into the straw thatch of their quarters, over all the roar of the conflict we hear the words of the rival centurions, and pause for an instant to listen to their quarrel. Through the long days of fighting and the weary nights of ceaseless toil, we enter into every thought and emotion of the Roman soldiery as we have not done before. We feel their solicitude for the feeble health of the brave lieutenant, working so far beyond his strength. We experience all the despair that sickens their hearts as they see every attempt to communicate with Cæsar thwarted by the besieging foe. There is not an emotion, no thrill of excitement, no misery of fear in all the scene that is not ours as we watch its progress.

It is very apparent, too, why Cæsar has so emphasized this scene in the narrative. He wished first of all to do tribute to the heroism of his men who had succeeded in holding their own against such fearful odds till relief came. In the second place he wished to emphasize the fact that Cicero had avoided disaster by adhering strictly to all the customs and traditions of the

Roman art of war, and above all by taking vital action only at his direction.

As in the Battle at the Sambre, the solution of the situation comes through Cæsar. After many failures, Cicero at last succeeds in informing Cæsar of the situation, and within twenty-four hours the great general has returned word that relief is coming. The wildest joy prevails in the fire-blackened camp, and soon the poor, exhausted soldiers, watching so anxiously, see the smoke rising over the tree tops to the south, the harbinger of their deliverance.

The Roman army had once more been victorious over the vastly larger Gallic forces, because behind it was the organizing, directing influence of one great mind. Again the need of the Gallic cause is emphasized, and we realize more clearly than before that unless some one unselfish soul be sent to guide the barbarian forces, the struggle will soon be ended.

And now at last as the fulfillment of our expectations comes Vercingetorix, a man with an intellect broad enough to unite into one effort the scattered forces of the Gallic peoples, and with a generalship almost equal to Cæsar's own, to guide them to all but victory. Vercingetorix is one of the commanding figures of history. His noble ambition, his brilliant career and unworthy end surround him with a halo of tragic interest that makes him the most fascinating figure in the conquest of Gaul.

He is, indeed, the hero of the Gallic people. True, he does not appear until late, but his coming has been foreshadowed by all the action that has preceded. The climax of each crisis except the first has emphasized the fact that brute force, however great, is no match for organized power. We have felt keenly the need of a champion to organize and guide the Gallic armies. As this crying need of the Gallic cause, he has been before our minds till, when we can await him no longer, he comes upon the scene, an ideal Gaul, towering above his fellows in intellectual and spiritual greatness—like Saul, from his shoulders and upward. The contest is no longer between the keen intellect of

the Roman and the irrational muscle of the Gallic people, but between two intellects not so poorly matched after all.

As the action opens we see before us the Gallic nation in a ferment of discontent, writhing and twisting under its bonds. From all parts of the scene comes the groan of misery, the murmur of rebellion. The Roman general has turned his back for a moment, and in the lull from active hostilities, the outraged victim of the tragedy proposes to hurl itself with all the fury of despair against the chains that bind it.

And in all the disorder and uproar of the scene, we see with relief the nucleus of possible success in the army gathering about the standard of Vercingetorix, the magnetic Arvernian. From the first his movements are characterized by a well-directed energy and an intelligent grasp of the situation that, added to the magnetic influence of his personality, seemed to thrill his countrymen with unquestioning confidence in his ability. Even the neighboring tribes rally enthusiastically about his banner, and very soon the influence of this one strong mind begins to draw the scattered forces into an organization more perfect than they have ever known.

Vercingetorix unflinchingly marches to meet the Roman legions, but discovering the points of his own weakness, retreats for the time before Cæsar, hoping to remedy all deficiencies in his own forces before coming into open conflict with the more thoroughly organized Roman army.

He sets before the Gallic representatives, assembled in a council of war, his plans for the campaign. He advises first of all that everything be burned on either side of the Roman line of march in order either to starve them into withdrawing or to compel them to forage at unsafe distances from their camp. In the second place, all towns except those rendered impregnable by nature are to be burned, in order to deprive his countrymen of all excuse for not engaging in the war, and also in order to remove the slightest possibility of Cæsar's obtaining supplies. The foresight of his plan, as well as the lofty spirit that inspires him to urge this unselfish sacrifice cannot but

arouse in us the deepest respect and sympathy for the Gallic patriot.

But just here is the strategic blunder that makes the tragic ending of the act a necessity. There is the momentary yielding of head to heart. Vercingetorix' sympathy causes him, against his better judgment, to grant the entreaties of the people of Avaricum, who beg for the preservation of their city. This one concession of the great leader represents his tragic guilt, and as it is a fault on the side of too great humanity, it places us instantly in keener sympathy with him.

It was the preservation of Avaricum, the one flaw in Vercingetorix' strategy, that gave the Roman army supplies when they must otherwise have withdrawn, and made it possible for them to press on to Lugovia. In fact, on this one town hinged the whole course of the war, and had it been destroyed at the outset, we can hardly see how the Gallic cause could have been other than victorious.

The siege of Avaricum with its heartless massacre of the helpless inhabitants and the blockade of Gergovia with its thrilling account of the charge of the Roman soldiers against the beleaguered walls, carry us on breathlessly from victory to defeat till we reach the final crisis of the whole war—the siege of Alesia. What a marvelously dramatic climax to all the action preceding!

One ceases not to marvel at the unlimited resources of the Roman general, at his wonderful works of circumvallation, one ceases not to pity the noble patriot doomed to loss in the dreadful conflict. We have so come from one climax to another that I have no words left adequate to the culminating grandeur of this last. The hour when Cæsar's men stand back to back fighting a double foe, the hordes of Gauls pressing on to the relief of their friends within the city and the forces within fighting with the fury of desperation—this hour is the pinnacle of dramatic interest in the entire action, the climax of climaxes. It is the mighty fortissimo crash of discord that culminates the whole movement.

And at that supreme climax, when all the interests involved



hang in the balances, there is a desperate struggle over to the northwest of the line of circumvallation. The flank movement of the army without is likely to be successful. And then for the last time once more to the critical point of action there moves down across the valley a single commanding figure. The eyes of all are on him ; his scarlet uniform makes him the most prominent figure in all the confusion of the scene, and as he goes down the slope in full view of the enemy cheer after cheer rises from the Roman lines. It is Cæsar. Once more he is the solution of the struggle. His arrival at the point so strongly contested turns the tide of the battle.

The Gallic cause is lost. The pendulum of fate has swung for the last time to the Roman side, and the conquest of Gaul is ended. The roar of the struggle still goes rumbling off into the distance as thunder along the horizon after a summer storm. But when Vercingetorix, hero, patriot, martyr, bows his noble head before the victorious Roman, the tragedy of Gallic liberty is complete.

And yet, like a postlude in a plaintive minor key, there always comes to us as the last touch to the great drama the dim picture of that kingly Gallic face peering up from the foul darkness of a Roman dungeon, waiting through the dreary length of six dark years till his relentless Roman master choose to make his death a part of his great triumph. And then amid all the splendor of a Roman gala day, far from the land that had inspired his life, the hero of the tragedy ends the career that has immortalized him in the memory of man as the first great national hero of France

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